

A story is told about a church who had received a memorial gift in honor of someone who had passed away. There was a short note written on a beautiful little card that described whom the memorial was for. It said the usual, "Enclosed you will find a check to be used as a memorial for..." with the name. The problem was the person who sent it... forgot to sign the note AND to enclose the check. To top it off, the card had been purchased from the Alzheimer's Foundation. This is defined as a nightmare for our faithful Financial Secretaries, Helen & Karen. Memorials come in all shapes and sizes – this church not only has a Memorial Fund but also a Memorial tree where names are affixed in tribute to their legacy firmly rooted on earth.

The scripture we have before us today is a form of memorial which is given to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. The context of this story is that the Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after their escape from Egypt. You may remember the story of that escape, whether reading it in the book of Exodus or seeing it played out in Cecile B. Demille's "Ten Commandments," where the people cross the Red Sea to safety on dry land. If only Demille had extended the already lengthy movie to this story in Joshua, we would have a complete story with bookends, coming full circle after 40 years to the people crossing waters once more into a new existence, called the Promised Land. The 2 stories relay the beginning and the end of the wilderness journey. Thus, it isn't a coincidence that today's story has similar themes to the crossing of the Red Sea because readers are invited to remember God's plans and promises for Israel, which are consistently to lead God's people to safety and blessing. From the Red Sea to the Jordan River, with a transition in leadership from Moses to Joshua, it is the same God delivering God's people. As the people advance through the overflowing banks of the Jordan, they place their trust in the same God who ushered them out of Egypt. Interestingly, they are crossing at the time of the harvest, when the river is at flood stage and thus one of the fastest flowing rivers of its size. Imagine the Sacramento River after a few more weeks like this one. The story tells us that the rushing waters miraculously stand still in a "single heap," a Hebrew word rarely used in scripture to describe how the waters appeared to the people; they were as a "heap." A single heap is the

same description used in the parting of the Red Sea, and we begin to recognize the intentional parallels between the two stories. These are narratives with accurate geographical markers and boundaries that were not meant to be interpreted as historical fact as much as memorials to incredible faith.

The point at which today's story takes a new direction is in the leadership phase of the water crossings. Whereas during the crossing of the Red Sea, a divine angel and a mysterious pillar of fire lead the people, in the crossing of the Jordan, it is human priests carrying the ark of the covenant who lead the group. It seems that in this extended wilderness period, God has picked up some human helpers besides the big names like Moses, Aaron, and Joshua to lead the people. These priests stand on dry ground in the middle of the river until the entire nation finishes crossing over. Their leadership isn't at a sanctuary altar, but in a potentially dangerous river, and their standing there with the ark was for the sake of their sisters and brothers who passed over. It gives us a new understanding of our God who works to free people from dangerous and wilderness living. When our sisters and brothers in the faith hang in there for us, standing up for our welfare, we recognize God's work within them. There are so many dangerous and raging rivers which seek to drown those in our midst, whether it be in the halls of frat houses where girls are drugged for sex, or on the playground where a child is bullied because they look different, or in the locker rooms where teens are beat up because of their gender identity, or in the board room where race norms dictate promotions. When we pick up the mantle, that golden ark which is a constant symbol of God's presence with us, placing our footing on God's solid ground and holding off the waters of danger, we become priests to all who cross our path. It is what we call in church terminology the "priesthood of all believers" which provides each of us the opportunity to serve one another. Aspects of this practice are being nurtured right now as our Nominating Committee seeks leaders to serve one another in our upcoming year. Whether you accept the call to be an elder or a committee chairperson, a teacher or Board leader, communion server or Thrift store worker, caretaker of our building or grounds, these tasks become reflections of God's presence alive and working in you. You accept that role of "priest" who paves the way for others to experience God's embrace.

The crossing of the Jordan River adds a new perspective directly connected to memorials as I mentioned earlier. Joshua calls 12 men, one from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, and commands that two piles of 12 large stones be erected at the spot of their crossing. One mound of stones was set up at the water's edge and the other mound stood in the middle of the river where the priests had bravely stood holding the ark while the people crossed over. These stones were meant to be a memorial forever as verse 7 states. The stones are physical and material memorials, holding deep mythic meanings, memories and resonances over time. According to the scribe of the book of Joshua, the stones are still there to this day. As Joshua invites the placement of these stones, he sets the tone for others to ask, "What do these stones mean? Why are they here?" Think about the circular placement of stones in Stonehenge, a mystery that we still have yet to solve. Or you may remember the trend not too long ago of "Redding Rocks" and their placement all around our community. In Scotland, stones are placed in piles or stacks in memory of a person, place, or to mark a path or location and are called "cairns." There is a Scottish blessing which says, "I'll put a stone on your cairn." Contemporary artist Andy Goldsworthy has explored aspects of stones in his work. His "Garden of Stones", commissioned by the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, features dwarf oak saplings growing from holes which have been drilled into large boulders. Planted by Holocaust survivors and their families, these boulders are spread throughout the garden with saplings springing out of them as a memorial to the improbable survival of human life. Each of us has experienced significant moments, not always world-changing, but often in the routine of our daily lives, when we knew for sure that God was with us and helping us. These are moments outside the four walls of a church, outside the expected encounters with the divine, in daily activities and conversations that become tangible representations of God's activity in our world. Whether we erect a physical reminder of those moments or imbed them firmly in our memories, marking such times, conditions, emotions, hopes and dreams are essential to living our faith. For ultimately, to remember, to mark in time, and to come to understand our past is to make sense of our lives in the present.

Contemporary artist Wyland tells a story of painting a mural on a giant blank wall which faced Kaiser Hospital in Hawaii. For years, patients who were sick and dying had looked out

their windows to see a depressing beige wall, the architects' answer to saving costs. But Wyland saw it as a perfect canvas to paint life-size humpback whales and other colorful marine life. As he began painting, he noticed an old man with an IV attached to his arm sitting in a wheelchair, watching his every move. Day after day, this man would come out on the balcony of his room and spend nearly every moment watching him paint his largest marine mural. Wyland would wave to him and he would wave back with all the energy left in his fragile body. Four months later, at the dedication of the mural, Wyland cut the ribbon with city officials and thousands of supporters in attendance. Wyland caught a glimpse of the old man who tipped his hand to him, for what would be the last time. Wyland tried to hold back his emotion as he waved back. He found out later from his family that he had incurable cancer and should have died months before, but had wanted to live to see the mural completed. The man died shortly after the ceremony; his memory and his spirit living with Wyland, and within that mural, forever. One more memorial stacked upon many to say that there is nothing, neither cancer or bigotry, drugs or sexual assault, flooded rivers or dangerous seas that can separate us from the love of God as depicted in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.